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Secrecy Stamp Used to Hide Ignorance

The Reagan administration is using the rubber stamp of secrecy with reckless disregard for the American public's right to know.

I've sounded this theme before, but this time I'm going to let you in on a little secret about many of these classified documents: They often are classified not so much for what is in them, as for what is not.

Take, for example, a Central Intelligence Agency report I saw—classified higher than top secret—on "Unidentified Research and Development Facility No. 3." This confessed that the CIA had not been able to solve the puzzle of a building at a Soviet nuclear test site. Its purpose remained unknown for nearly a decade.

The CIA had no idea whether Yuri Andropov had a wife. Her presence at his funeral finally enabled the CIA's dogged agents to solve this puzzle. Konstantin Chernenko's wife also was kind enough to show up for the same event, settling another intelligence gap.

Hiding the limitations of U.S. intelligence may be justifiable at the "top secret" level, but there is no excuse at the lower "secret" level.

Ignorance classified at the secret level is more likely intended to protect the intelligence analysts who wrote the report and don't want to advertise their lack of special insight.

My associates Donald Goldberg and Dale Van Atta have come across an example of this in a 1982 Air Force study, "Air Force 2000."

The executive summary my associates obtained

is classified "Secret—No For—WNINTEL." By legal definition, secret means that the disclosure of this document would cause serious damage to our national security. "No For" means "no foreign dissemination," the document cannot be shared with a foreign country. "WNINTEL" stands for "Warning Notice: Sensitive Intelligence Sources and Methods Involved."

All that classified embroidery points to the idea that this is one hot document. So my associates dutifully compared the secret version with the public one to find out what the classification stamp was used for.

Their conclusion is that the secret document is simply crystal-ball gazing and has no business being classified, other than to hide the absence of omniscience evidenced by the Air Force's top planners.

Out of the total of 94 paragraphs in the secret report, only seven were classified. Even these seven secret paragraphs contained nothing particularly sensitive; for instance, the notion that "The U.S. and U.S.S.R. will remain ideologically and politically opposed," or the prediction that "the perception of warfare as a legitimate means of settling international disputes will gain greater acceptance."

Page 5 of this secret summary features a chart, separately classified secret, of 11 "nations seen as 'possible' members of the six-nation 'nuclear club' by the year 2000. Never mind that I publicly reported these 11 in 1979, three years before the Air Force report.